

## 研究報告

What do People Expect from *Itako* (Japanese Shamans) (IV)?  
How grief is expressed by Japanese Shamans *Itako* and participant  
in religious performance after the Great East Japan Earthquake人々はイタコに何を求めるのか(4)  
2011 年夏の恐山  
——東日本大震災後はじめての夏にイタコをたずねた人々——

Eiko HARA

**Keywords:** *the Japanese shaman Itako, Osorezan Bodaiji Temple, the Great East Japan Earthquake*  
イタコ、恐山菩提寺、東日本大震災

## Introduction

The Great East Japan Earthquake happened on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2011. Since this event, many people have visited Japanese shamans, called *Itako*, for communicating with deceased family member and relatives. In this paper, I will focus on how grief is expressed by Japanese shamans, called *Itako* and participants in religious performances after the Great East Japan Earthquake.

The studies of *Itako* in Japan have developed by focusing on their shamanistic activities, especially her abilities of communications with deceased persons. Traditional *Itako* is commonly a blind female. They gather on Mt. Osorezan at limited special seasons as like Japanese Golden Week (the end of April and beginning of May), the summer festival are held at Osorezan Buddhist Temple, the Bon festival (Buddhist rites for ancestors and the dead), and the autumn festival. This is because *Itako* live near Mt. Osorezan and the Shimokita Peninsula.

Many people have intended to communicate with deceased persons at Mt. Osorezan, the most famous place to gather *Itako*. So many people come by cars, buses, trains and airplanes from all over Japan every year. However, on that season that was the first summer after the earthquake, not so many people could go travel anywhere, especially in Tohoku areas because the traffic routes are broken and cut off for the earthquake. Still, many people mourn for the souls of deceased persons.

However, although many people from the disaster areas on the east coasts of Tohoku areas were inconvenienced even in daily life, they

come and pray for deceased persons at Osorezan Bodaizi temple. I will report how grief is expressed by Japanese shamans *Itako* and participants at Mt. Osorezan on the summer in 2011.

This article was written for a report on the IUAES (International Union of Anthropology and Ethnology Studies) Conference at Manchester University in England on August 8th, 2013. I will show the general introduction based on this report.

1. The Background of *Itako* Beliefs and Osorezan Bodaiji Temple: The religious complex

## 1-1 Buddhist Temple

There are several complex religions in Osorezan area. The public religion is the Buddhism. Its center is the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple which is the Soto school of Zen Buddhism. Many Buddhist priests and monks live there from spring to autumn. However, few people live there in winter, because of the snow and cold. When the Bodaiji temple held the Buddhism rites, many supporters of the same school who live in/near Shimokita peninsula helped it.

1-2 Guarding the Safeties of Sea as Marine Gods<sup>(1)</sup>

The Bodaiji Buddhism temple has another face of the religion. It consists of the several folk beliefs. The one of the folk beliefs is the role of marine gods. Fishermen pray for the safety of their ships and the big catches of fishing. So, when they catch many fish, they donate wooden stupa called Sotoba with their names written and their ship name to the

\* Department of International Cultural Studies Morioka Junior College Iwate Prefectural University



Figure 1 : Donated wooden stupas by fishermen



Figure 2 : A Donated stone lantern

Osorezan temple as gratitude for gods (Figure 1). Merchants of Edo period (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century) also prayed for the safety of sea trade. They donated stone lanterns with their names carved and ship's name (Figure 2). According to the historical studies, the beliefs of Osorezan spread from the marine trade routes in Edo Period. Some of them came from western Japan as we knew from the characters of carved stones [Miyazaki 2002 : 356-379].

### 1-3 Fishermen's Beliefs : Diseased Person's Clothes Hung up, called *Ban*.

A wooden Buddhism main hall called Hon-Dou in the Bodaiji Temple is built near the middle gate of the temple. Inside that hall, we can see the hanging of many clothes in odd formation, like an octopus with patchwork. A person working there said that fishermen come and hang the special formation clothes there. It was called *Ban* (幡) and made by deceased person's clothes. *Ban* is made for a dead person to go to heaven according to Buddhist belief. He said many *Ban* were hung without anybody noticing. About 10 *Ban* were usually hung a year.

### 1-4 The Folk Beliefs

People who live in the Shimokita-hantou peninsula say the souls of persons go to Mt. *Osorezan* after death. This belief relates to the folk religion of *Itako* shamans, shamans who call the deceased persons souls at the Temple. However, the Buddhist Monks of Osorezan temple officially said they have no relationship to *Itako's* religious activities. Kusunoki Masahiro, who was a religious scholar in Tohoku University, indicated that *Itako* shamans came to Mt. Osorezan after Meiji period<sup>(2)</sup> (the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century) [KUSUNOKI 1966 : 207-209].

## 2. The Areas of Osorezan Beliefs and the Disaster Areas of the Great East Japan Earthquake

Working persons and monks in Bodaiji Temple say disaster areas of the Great East Japan Earthquake are the almost the same areas of Osorezan religious main supporter's residences.

### 2-1 The Supporters Organization of Soto School of Zen Buddhism in Tohoku Area



Figure 3: The ceremony of entrance of the chief monk



Figure 4: The religious supporters with palanquin

There are many Zen Buddhist temples of Soto school in the Tohoku area. They have an organized relationship in the Tohoku area. We can see the summer festival, which is the biggest festival at Osorezan Bodaiji Temple, in July. There is a ceremony in which the chief monk enters the Temple (Figure 3). He rides on the palanquin which is shouldered by two men. In the front and behind the palanquin, the supporters of same school temples are singing and walking in a parade to the Temple (Figure 4).

However, the summer festival in 2011 held very small parade. A monk said because many temples were washed out by earthquake and Tsunami.

### 2-2 Beliefs of Fishermen at the Disaster Areas

After autumn festival is over, winter season begins at Mt. Osorezan. The road to the temple is closed for snow from about the first week on November until the end of April. So, during the winter the temple is closed. When spring comes again, the temple opens the door and people come again for praying.

A monk of Osorezan Bodaiji Temple said at the first day of the temple in spring of 2011, some fishermen's families came to the temple from the damaged coast district in spite of the difficulty of the travel at

that time in Japan. A fisherman and his wife said their fishing boats and fishing tools had floated away, and they were in great distress in daily life. Even under these adverse conditions, they came to the temple of Osorezan, because Osorezan is also famous for the gods guarding the sea's safety<sup>(3)</sup>.

As I described above (1-2), fishermen have a custom to donate a wooden stupa named Sotoba for thanks of Marine Gods. The donated stupa by fishermen is much larger than usual. A monk said huge stupas like that is very expensive and about half of them were donated by fishermen who come from the disaster areas of Great East Japan Earthquake. We do not know if half of fishermen actually come from disaster areas; however, this discourse indicates many fishermen come Osorezan Bodaiji to respect and give thanks to Marine Gods. And as we see the many stupas in Figure2, one of the stupa was donated by a Fishermen's Union, and the others were donated by a big chief family of fishermen's group near Osorezan Bodaiji Temple.

### 2-3 Buddhist Statues and Monuments with Stones

Besides stone lanterns, there are many Buddhist statues and monuments with stones which were brought from outside in the Temple area. And many stones indicate where they came from, because people carved and wrote the names of their home cities. Thus, I noted the city names of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture and Aomori Prefecture. People in these areas brought many big stone monuments and Buddhism statues inside the district of Bodaiji Temples.

For example, entering the central gate of Temple, we see the big Buddhist Stone Statue on left side on small hill, which is named Enmei-Zizouson (Life prolonging Buddhism Statue). Many persons who came from Iwate Prefecture made this statue. And a big stone stupa is standing near the Jikaku-Taishi-Dou. The religious group coming from Sendai built it in 1971. Like these cases, we can find many statue and monuments brought from the cities of Iwate, Miyagi, and Aomori Prefecture. Of course, we can find the name of other places, however, the working persons at Osorezan Bodaiji Temple said many devoted religious supporters of Bodaiji Temple live in the disaster areas of the Great East Japan Earthquake, hence the city names of these Tohoku areas on the Buddhist statues and monuments. These names of cities probably suggest these statues, monuments, and stupas are related to the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple.

Also we see many names on paper in the main hall called Hon-Dou at the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple. They devoted a set of lantern, namely two lanterns. Their group consisted of the Osorezan Believers in Kamaishi city in Iwate Prefecture. They came in 1978. I counted about 252 persons' names there. These many names show there were many dedicated believers in Kamaishi city in 1970's. The members who came to Osorezan Bodaiji Temple perhaps were not all the members, however these names represented there are how many persons donated

lanterns. Kamaishi city is also one of the disaster areas of Great East Japan Earthquake.

## 3. The Religious Folk Customs in the Tohoku area of Japan

### 3-1 The First Bon Festival after Death in Japanese Religious Folk Customs

According to the Japanese religious folk customs, dead persons and ancestors visit their family and descendants at their houses from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of August (originally in the lunar calendar, July). The first Bon festival after death is very important in Japanese customs. Usually, families hold the special ceremony at their house, making an altar for the dead person and ancestors. At the first Bon festival, each house hangs two lanterns or lights and burns wood at the front of the house at night. Inside the house, they put a meal on the altar every time with family's meal. However, details of the way of Bon ceremonies are a little different from the sects of Buddhism and Japanese regions.

### 3-2 Religious Ceremonies of *Itako* Shamans after a Funeral Rite : *Kuchiyose* is the Ceremony of Calling Dead Person's Souls

#### 3-2-1 What is the ceremony of *Kuchiyose*?



Figure 5: People were waiting in their turn. Not so many people came to Osorezan as usual at the Summer Festival on July, 2011. On the board, we can read the characters in Japanese, '*Itako's Kuchiyose ceremonies*'.

The ceremony named *Kuchiyose* means talking with *Itako's* mouth in Japanese. *Kuchiyose* is a ceremony in which the *Itako* calls the dead person's soul. And clients listen to the dead person's talking through using *Itako's* mouth. Before the ceremony begins, *Itako* asks clients what they want to know from the dead.

This ceremony is held some days after the funeral ceremony takes place. This ceremony remains in the Tohoku area of Northern Japan; however, for about ten years there are very few people demanding this style ceremony after the funeral. Generally speaking, many people in

Tohoku area consider that the customs of *Kuchiyose* have disappeared been for long time.

A famous Japanese folklore scholar, Sakurai Tokutaro, described two types of *Kuchiyose* ceremony. One type should be performed within 49 days after death, and is named *shin-kuchi*. It means ‘new mouth’ in Japanese. Another type is the family should ask *Itako* to perform the ceremony at a decided day of a year, for example the Bon festival, a day of the equinoctial week or the anniversary of the dead. It is named *furu-kuchi*, it means “old mouth” in Japanese. Sakurai indicated that in some areas people have no customs to hold a *Kuchiyose* ceremony after a funeral. However, they only practice the second type’s ceremony.

### 3-2-2 *Itako* in the present days

I heard from an *Itako* in Iwate Prefecture. She told me the old style *Kuchiyose* ceremony after funeral was performed as follows. The dead person’s family invites *Itako* and their relatives to their house. The ceremony is held from evening to dawn. It is a long ceremony. Once it begins, it should continue to the end, never permitting any interruption. She did not remember what she said during the ceremony, so they avoid drinking water or something before the ceremony because when the ceremony begins, even *Itako* cannot stop the talking of the dead. The participants listen to the talking of the dead using her mouth. Usually the dead person using *Itako*’s mouth says that he or she watched over his or her family and their health, and replies to what their family wants to ask. After finishing the talking, the dead gives a last greeting and goes back to heaven. After the dead went back, *Itako* regains consciousness, and asks the family who they want to call next and what they want to ask next. Like this, the ceremony continues from close relatives to the far relatives.

In the present days, not so many traditional *Itako* shamans remained, thus if anybody wants to call the dead person’s soul, it might be difficult to find *Itako* around his own town. I interviewed some people who visited Osorezan. They said they came there because they did not know where the *Itako* was around their towns. Many people went Mt. Osorezan at the first Bon festival after the Great East Japan Earthquake, because this is the famous place to gather *Itako* shamans.

## 4. The Summer in 2011: The First Bon Festival in Osorezan after the Great East Japan Earthquake

The summer festival of Osorezan Bodaiji temple is the biggest festival of the year, as I mentioned above. Many persons have come there every summer festival. However, it had only half the visitors in 2011. This was from the influence of the Great East Japan Earthquake. At that time, the roads were still broken and cut off in Eastern Japan. Even more, many people mourned for the souls of deceased persons.

The Bon festival is 20 days after the summer festival. According to my interviews with *Itako*, people who survived the earthquake and tsunami visiting *Itako* gradually increased around the Bon festival.

The Bon festival was held from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of August in Japan. At the *Asahi Newspaper* published on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011, we see the articles about the first *Bon* festival after the earthquake at Osorezan Bodaiji Temple. The main title was “Surviving people went to Osorezan to hear deceased family’s voices”. This article said, they visited *Itako* to demand the religious performance ‘*Kuchiyose*’.

I often saw the clients who visit *Itako* at Osorezan Bodaiji Temple alone several years before the earthquake. However I saw many surviving families who came with their family members, relatives and tour groups in 2011. I will show some cases below, both from my research interview and from this article.

### 4-1 With Whom and for What purpose did they inquire of *Itako*?

#### 4-1-1 From my Interviews

##### Case 1

I interviewed some women who came for the temple. A woman said her husband had not found his father’s body, so she came with her family, namely her husband, her mother in law and her baby who was born after earthquake. Also a brother of her husband’s father came to Osorezan by her family’s car together. Their relatives also came with their families by their cars. They promised to meet at a time and day at Osorezan before departure. Many people were waiting for the divine *Itako* in turn, so they also were in a line together for long time.

The family asked *Itako* to call her husband’s father, their relatives also sitting together to listen in the front of *Itako*. After they communicated with their father, their relatives asked to call another deceased person next.

They said they don’t know any shamans like *Itako* around their house, and her husband’s mother came together by their car, she and her some relatives have not had a chance to go to Mt. Osorezan for these few decades. So the mother and her family decided to come with her relatives for looking for her husband’s body to ask *Itako* to talk with him.

#### Analysis of Case 1

As I pointed out in this case, surviving family usually came with their family and relatives. As has been noted, people have customs to ask *Itako* to call the dead person after the funeral ceremony in the Northern Tohoku district. And after one dead person’s soul goes back to the heaven, other relatives begin to ask *Itako* to call another dead person in turn.

After the earthquake, this woman’s father-in-law suddenly went to the heaven. The family experienced deep grief, and they sat together



front of *Itako*, and asked her to call and hear their familiar person's voice. And the voice reminded them of the deceased person.

I think this is the important meaning of visiting *Itako* with family and relatives. That is, once they listen to *Itako*'s voice, they retrieve the memories of the dead persons. And they can talk about the memories of the deceased persons and can share the similar grief experiences. After *Itako*'s performances, they drive home.

#### 4-1-2 Other Cases in the Newspaper

A Newspaper reporter interviewed three persons in the *Asahi Shimbun* (*Shimbun* means newspaper in Japanese) on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2011. I will review these reports.

##### Case 2

This is a story of a woman. She came with her son by car, driving 7 hours. After she listened to her dead husband's voice through the *Itako*'s mouth, she was released from torment because she could know what had occurred to her husband and could give to him last greeting.

She came to *Mt. Osorezan* to talk to her lost husband again. When the earthquake occurred, they were shopping at the store located in a highland. After earthquake, he went back to his house to help his old father, and after he brought him to highland, he went to the sea to secure his fishing ship. The woman could not believe it and she wanted to ask her husband why he could not escape. He said, with using *Itako*'s mouth, he didn't know these biggest waves were coming, so he was left behind. And he said she should live happily with their son and he would protect his family from the heaven. After this performance of *Itako*, a woman was released from her sad experience.

(*The Asahi Shimbun* on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2011)

##### Case 3

Next, we see another case. A woman came from Southern Tohoku area by using a bus tour. She was 50 years old and had lost her mother. She and her sister felt regret because they stayed together in the same house, however they could not help their mother. Her sister could not visit the *Itako*, because her sister had been depressed, so she only came there by bus tour. She said she could communicate with her mother through the *Itako*'s mouth. She asked to tell her mother to rest in peace, and her mother replied that she had not been lucky, but she did not hold a grudge against the woman and her sister or anybody.

(*The Asahi Shimbun* on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2011)

##### Case 4

In this case a woman was 70 years old and lost her brother. She saw the brother had gone into the Tsunami. She said, he said nothing when he disappeared into the wave, so she came to ask *Itako* what he thought now. And his brother said to her, he hoped she would take care of his two sons.

(*The Asahi Shimbun* on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2011)

#### Analysis of Case 2, Case 3 and Case 4

What is expressed by these three cases from the newspaper article?

In case2, they came with their family. In other case3 and case4, we saw a woman came only herself, however, actually they wanted to come with their sister and family.

We saw in the newspaper their feeling expressed with these words: 'Suddenly Unexpected Parting' and 'to fill their lack of feelings'. 'Surviving families ask *Itako* to call their lost family'. In those cases we know people cannot stand the unusual sudden separation, namely we know how important it is to say good bye each other to the last time before separating. As a result of the earthquake, many persons could not say good-bye to their family because it occurred so suddenly and unexpectedly. So it brought their family the feeling of lack of closure with the deceased. The newspaper titles express this things. So, we can see in these three cases, they came to *Osorezan* to put an end to the disconnection from deceased family members.

From the other case of my interviews, the interviewees said they actually wanted to find their family, brother and sisters and relatives. And they really want to know their lost family members' demands. So they came there to ask *Itako* shaman.

#### 4-2 For the repose of souls at the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple



Figure 6: The Temple with the stupa for the repose of victim people's souls in 2011.



Figure 7: The next year the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple stood a Buddhist statue and held a Buddhism ceremony for the repose of souls at on 22<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

As I described above, there were fishermen's folk beliefs in the *Osorezan Bodaiji Temple*, and the disaster areas of the Great East Japan Earthquake are the areas of *Osorezan* religious main supporter's residences (1-3). Thus, several monks and workers said for my interviews that visiting people came from the disaster areas after the earthquake occurred for only two months; nevertheless they lived in the temporary dwelling.

Therefore, in front of Osorezan Bodaiji stood a stupa for repose of souls of victims on July, 2011 (Figure 6). And the next year, for the same purpose, they stood a statue of Ksitigarbha, namely Zizo-Bosatsu in Japanese. Zizo-Bosatsu is a main Buddhist image at Osorezan Bodaiji Temple. It held an offering consecration ceremony on 22th, July 2012(Figure 7).

## Conclusion

As I described above, there are many religious complexes at Mt. Osorezan. The main formal religion is Buddhism, moreover there are other folk beliefs like the belief of Marine Gods, fishermen's beliefs and the folk beliefs around peninsula Shimokita-hantou which is the Osorezan Bodaiji Temple located peninsula. These folk beliefs include *Itako* shamans' religious folk belief.

I found that many people went to Osorezan and asked *Itako* to call the deceased family members and relatives after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Sometimes they went there in order to perform the traditional religious ceremony. The others went to find their families who still did not come back their body. And others went there to put an end to the disconnection with deceased family members and they could get the release from deep grief.

I regard the processes of these religious actions as a kind of pilgrimage, because the surviving families went to Osorezan in order to separate the grief of daily life. And at Osorezan they gathered relatives and went together to ask *Itako* to call dead persons. They remembered the same memories and shared the same feelings and were released from the grief. Visiting the *Itako* is the transition of their feelings. They went home and could reintegrate their daily lives.

We do not know if *Itako* shamans can really call the dead persons' souls. However, we know after visiting *Itako*, many people can feel release from grief. This is the main significance of the pilgrimage to Osorezan.

## Notes

- (1)NARUMI Kentaro (1977), HANAZONO Toshimaro (1991), TAKAMATSU Keikichi (1993), MIYAZAKI Fumiko (2002) and so on. They already pointed out the relations between sea and beliefs of Mt. Osorezan. I generally introduced this point before [HARA 2012 : 56-57]
- (2)Kusunoki changed the thinking later and wrote the beginning of *Itako* gathering at Osorezan Bodaiji was from the end of Taisho period to the beginning of Showa period, namely almost 1920's. [KUSUNOKI 1968:116-117]
- (3)When I stayed at the accommodation in Osorezan Bodaiji Temple in 2011, a monk said this story in his lecture. Later when I interviewed him, I heard the situation at that time. Later I found this story in his Blog.(Minami Zikisai 南直

哉「恐山あれこれ日記」(“The Diaries of Mt. Osorezan by this and that”)

(<http://indai.blog.ocn.ne.jp/osorezan/2011/05/05>) The final checking this Blog was on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 2013.

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HARA Eiko 原英子

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MINAMI ZIKISAI 南直哉

「恐山あれこれ日記」

<http://indai.blog.ocn.ne.jp/osorezan/2011/05/05>

## <日本語要旨>

東日本大震災後はじめての夏にイタコを尋ねた人々や恐山の僧侶、恐山菩提寺で働くにおこなったインタビューや新聞記事から2011年夏の恐山を報告した。恐山の信者は被災地域と関連が深い。震災後、イタコをたずねた人々は、心の癒しとともに新たな生活をはじめる契機をもった。人々のこうした宗教的行為について考察した。